ISD | Institute for Strategic Dialogue

digital dispatches ISD's blog for the latest in data-driven research on hate, disinformation and extremism.

How a pro-Kremlin ad campaign used the Israel-Hamas conflict to spread propaganda in France and Germany

11 October 2024

This Dispatch is also available in German.

Following the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, a pro-Kremlin ad network likely associated with the Doppelganger campaign began targeting audiences in France and Germany on Facebook utilising narratives around the conflict. These ads compare the Israel-Hamas war with the Russia-Ukraine war and spread pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives by criticising military support and humanitarian aid for Ukraine, criticising the US's role in the conflict, and using the Israel-Hamas war to exacerbate divisions around polarising topics in France and Germany.

In September 2024, the US Department of Justice announced the seizure of 32 domains used by the Doppelganger campaign to "covertly spread Russian government propaganda with the aim of reducing international support for Ukraine", among other aims. This strategy is consistent with the findings of this investigation, which found the ads echo common pro-Kremlin disinformation about the conflict which attempts to galvanise anti-American sentiment, and to bolster existing far-right narratives in France and Germany.

Key Findings

- ISD found 192 pro-Kremlin Facebook ads targeting audiences in France and Germany with respect to both the Israel-Hamas conflict and the war in Ukraine. All the ads were posted between 7 October 2023 and 30 August 2024.
- The ads echoed common pro-Kremlin disinformation, anti-American sentiment, and existing far-right narratives about the threats of immigration and economic decline in France and Germany, with the seeming intent to undermine the provision of military support and humanitarian aid for Ukraine and to seed fear and discord in the target countries.
- Most of these ads were deactivated within one day of being posted on the platform, however they each reached an average of 6,212 accounts prior to their removal.

- Based on the characteristics of these accounts, their narrative strategy, and signs of potential coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB), it is likely these ads are associated with the well-established Doppelganger campaign. The two Russian companies determined to be behind the campaign by Meta in September 2022 have since been hit with 'restrictive measures' and investigations by multiple government entities, and assessed to be under the control of the Russian Presidential Administration by the US Justice Department earlier this month.

Methodology

The following analysis is based on a sample of 192 Facebook ads that were made available in France and Germany between 7 October 2023 and 30 August 2024. Of these ads, 88 targeted a French audience and 104 targeted individuals in Germany.

The ads were retrieved from the Meta Ad Library using keyword combinations for 'Ukraine' and 'Gaza'/'Palestine' in French and German. Ads were included in the sample if they displayed characteristics that were similar to those of ads previously identified by ISD, DFRLab and EU DisinfoLab as part of the Doppelganger campaign. These characteristics include:

- Single-use Facebook pages with page names that followed generic naming patterns
- Identical text and visuals used by pages with the same naming patterns
- Cartoon-style visuals that follow the same style as visuals previously used by Doppelganger
- Sharing of known pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives about Ukraine
- Use of known pro-Kremlin information manipulation tactics, such as impersonation

The ads were then coded qualitatively to allow for thematic and discourse analysis of the main narratives. Quantitative analysis was also used to ascertain their potential reach and volume over time.

Pro-Kremlin Ads on Facebook

Doppelganger is a pro-Kremlin online campaign which is associated with the forgery of mainstream news websites and the spread of anti-Ukraine messaging. The operation was initially revealed by Meta and EU DisinfoLab in September 2022, and attributed to Russia by the French agency VIGINUM in 2023.

Research by ISD, DFRLab and EU DisinfoLab has previously demonstrated the use of Facebook ads to spread pro-Kremlin narratives and direct users to Doppelganger domains. For example, deceptive ads were used by pro-Kremlin actors to target German audiences ahead of the European Parliamentary elections and to target support for Ukraine and the farmers' protests in France.

This investigation adds to existing research by focusing on how pro-Kremlin ads have weaponised the Israel-Hamas war to share pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian and anti-American narratives in Europe.

Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB)

This study finds many similarities between previous pro-Kremlin Facebook ad campaigns and this effort using narratives around the Israel-Hamas conflict. Both the ads found during previous research and the ads in this dataset containing keywords on 'Ukraine' and 'Palestine/Gaza' show evidence of coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB). The ads are usually shared by inauthentic Facebook pages that appear to be created specifically for this purpose and follow specific naming conventions (example below). Multiple pages share the same ad using identical text and the same style of political cartoon that was noted in previous campaigns.

Adjective	**Noun**	**Venue**
Fantastic	Nature	Store
Stylish	Wellness	Collective
Bold	Gardening	Exchange
Trendy	Dance	Park
Artistic	History	Arena
Entertaining	Fitness	Museum
Adventurous	Nature	Corner
Entertaining	Spirituality	Gallery
Sophisticated	Hobbies	Center

Table 1: Example of naming convention used by pro-Kremlin Facebook ads.

The ads were published in batches with some being posted at the same time and some one or two days later, after the initial set had been removed by Meta. 78% of the pro-Kremlin ads in this analysis were removed within one day and only one ad was available on the platform as long as three days.

Tailored Strategies for France and Germany

Although the style of ads was similar across France and Germany, ISD's analysis found that the campaign employed different strategies to target users with content about the Israel-Hamas war in each country. There were differences both in terms of the volume and timing of the ads and the narratives they featured. For example, the volume of pro-Kremlin Facebook ads targeting Germany peaked shortly after the beginning of the conflict in October 2023, whereas those targeting France peaked in late November.

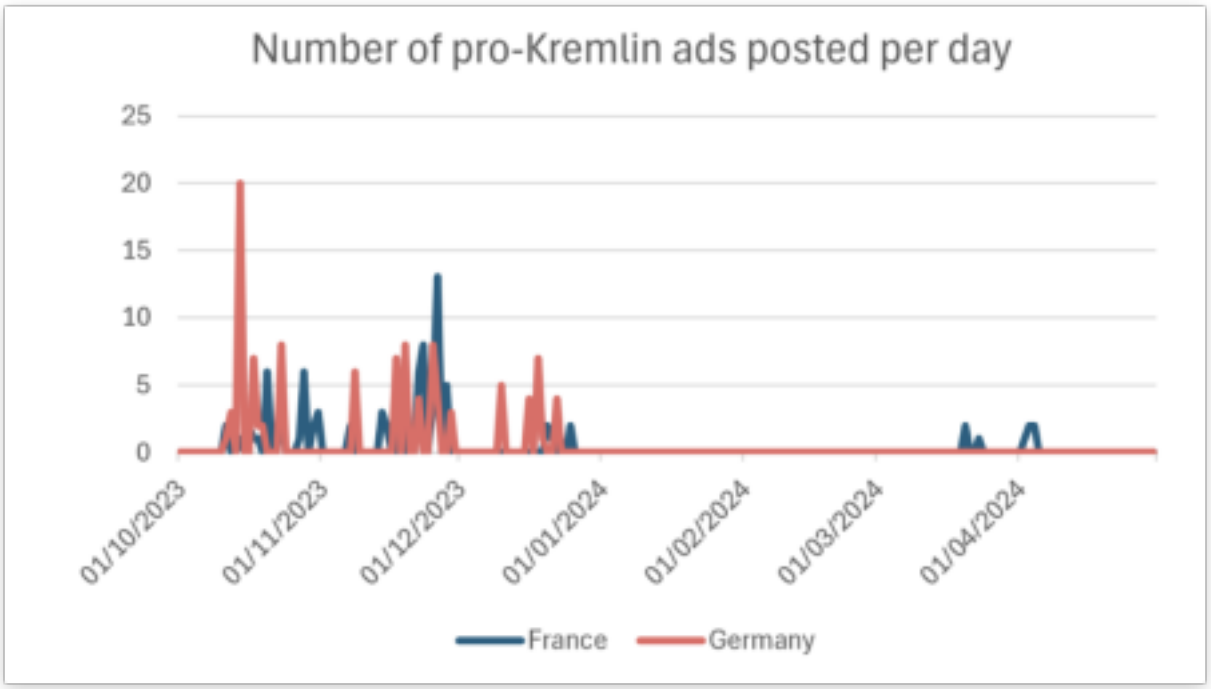

Figure 1: Number of pro-Kremlin ads posted per day from October 2023 to May 2024.

Narrative Analysis

Most of the 192 ads contained multiple narratives, ranging from known pro-Kremlin disinformation to anti-American propaganda. ISD qualitatively identified five broad narratives across the ads analysed (below) and coded each of the ads accordingly:

1. Allegations that weapons supplied to Ukraine by the West are being used by Hamas
2. Promotion of anti-American sentiment
3. Polarising commentary about domestic issues in France and Germany
4. Criticism of aid and military support for Ukraine
5. Claims that the war in Ukraine is benefiting arms traders

Across the two countries, the narrative that weapons supplied to Ukraine by NATO countries were used by Hamas was the most prominent, featuring in 37% of the ads analysed. The second most prominent narrative found in the ads was the promotion of anti-American sentiment, which appeared in 31% of ads (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Main narratives used by pro-Kremlin ads. Note: categories are not mutually exclusive; many of the ads contained multiple narratives.

While there was consistency in pro-Kremlin narratives used across France and Germany about Gaza and Ukraine, ISD also found that the content of the ads had been localised to suit domestic debates about crime, the economy and immigration. This localised content often leveraged narratives typically utilised by anti-immigration actors in each country. These included the portrayal of refugees from Ukraine and Gaza as a threat to public security and the two conflicts as the cause of domestic economic decline.

As shown below, this narrative targeting shifted in both countries over the course of the data collection period. This is common for information operations, where producers often test various messages to refine their approach before settling on a core set of topics that garner the most engagement. It is possible that the campaign sought to strategically target French and German audiences with specific narratives during times of domestic political upheaval. For example, there was a high volume of content focused on French politics during the autumn of 2023 (shown in figure 3), during which time President Macron was attempting to pass a controversial immigration bill supported by far-right actors like Marine Le Pen.

Figure 3: Pro-Kremlin narratives in France over time, broken down by category.

Figure 4: Pro-Kremlin narratives in Germany over time, broken down by category.

Narrative 1: Weapons Supplied to Ukraine by the West are Being Used by Hamas

Total: 59 ads (37%), France: 36 ads (44%), Germany: 22 ads (27%)

44% of ads targeting France and 27% of ads targeting Germany contained the claim that 'Hamas militants are using weapons supplied to Ukraine by NATO countries'. This narrative is part of a vast pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign based on a video that was shared on 8 October 2023, shortly after the Hamas-led assault on southern Israel on 7 October. The video claims to show members of Hamas declaring that Ukraine had sold them weapons that were used in the attack on Israel.

This video was accompanied by a false report claiming to be a joint collaboration between the BBC and Bellingcat and a screenshot of a fake Washington Post headline. These were shared widely on social media at the time but were quickly found not to exist on the official websites of the news outlets. The video and the accompanying reports were debunked as disinformation and their origins were traced back to Russian social media accounts and pro-Kremlin outlets.

The ads that used this narrative include claims that Ukrainians are 'thieves' who sell weapons to Hamas, and allegations that weapons that were originally sent to Ukraine by NATO countries also appeared in Poland, France and even in drug cartels in Mexico. Two types of ads point out that these allegedly stolen weapons pose a threat to the population of the ad target country by suggesting that these weapons originating in Ukraine could be used by Islamists in France and criminals in Germany.

In general, ads carrying this narrative and targeting a French audience point towards the adverse effects that the provision of arms by NATO partners has had on the physical safety of French people, and claim that 'French people are the ones that ultimately will have to pay for this'. On the other hand, ads targeting Germans have a stronger focus on the alleged criminal activity of Ukrainians.

A possible explanation for this might be the difference in the level of military, financial and humanitarian aid provided by both countries: While Germany provided €14.7 billion in aid between 24 January 2022 and 30 June 2024, France only provided €4.4 billion during the same period. There has been an ongoing public debate in France about whether this support provided to Ukraine is enough, which the pro-Kremlin ads may try to influence by emphasising the negative consequences that providing military support to Ukraine will have on the French people.

Image 1: Pro-Kremlin advertisement targeting Germany stating that weapons supplied to Ukraine are being used by Hamas (translation in footnote)[1]

Image 2: Pro-Kremlin advertisement targeting France stating that weapons supplied to Ukraine are being used by Hamas (translation in footnote)[2]

Narrative 2: Promoting Anti-American Sentiment

Total: 50 ads (31%), France: 28 ads (35%), Germany: 24 ads (30%)

ISD found that pro-Kremlin ads in both languages strongly promoted anti-American sentiment, often in combination with other narratives. Pro-Kremlin ads claim that the US is responsible for both the wars in Ukraine and in Gaza, accusing the US government of 'fighting proxy wars', 'being a warmonger' and having 'double standards' in terms of which countries it supports. This overall narrative aligns with existing research from ISD and others on how Russian actors initially responded to what they described as the 'West escalating the conflict in Gaza'.

However, the narratives shared by the ads often contradict themselves. For example, some ads accuse the US of being 'responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians' by supporting Israel, while others state that because the US is supporting both Ukraine and Israel, the US is not offering enough military support to Israel. Similarly, the US is accused of supporting both Hamas and Ukraine and therefore being responsible for both wars.

According to the ads, the US is refusing to solve the Israel-Hamas war peacefully as it benefits from the conflict and uses Israel to fight proxy wars in the Middle East with the aim of destroying Iran. The ads also claim that the US is using the war in Gaza to divert attention from the 'already lost war in Ukraine'.

The ads tailor this narrative to each audience by leveraging negative sentiment towards government and political leaders for centring their relationship with the US in decision-making. In the example below, Emmanuel Macron is criticised for over-catering to American interests, and the ad points out the need for new leaders that put the interests of the French people first.

Image 3: Pro-Kremlin ad targeting French users with anti-American sentiment (translation in footnote)[13]

Narrative 3: Exacerbating Polarisation of Domestic Issues in France and Germany

Total: 40 ads (25%), France: 27 ads (33%), Germany: 15 ads (19%)

By connecting the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza to immigration, public security, and economic conditions in France and Germany, pro-Kremlin actors seek to intensify domestic divisions in both countries. These narratives were observed as being more prominent in France than in Germany, with 33% of ads targeting a French audience including the narrative.

This narrative leverages existing domestic tension related to immigration by portraying the conflict in Gaza as a potential exacerbating factor. Pro-Kremlin ads warn that 'the war in Gaza will cause asylum seekers to come in large numbers', posing a threat to public security and 'making the country poorer'. In a similar manner, Ukrainian refugees are portrayed as a threat to the stability of the country.

Two types of ads utilised immigration to promote anti-American sentiment, claiming that 'US wars are causing asylum seekers to come in large numbers' and predicting that because of the economic deterioration caused by immigration 'companies will shift production to countries with a better economy, for example the US, which also happened when the war in Ukraine started'.

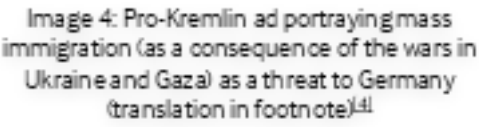

Image 4: Pro-Kremlin ad portraying mass immigration (as a consequence of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza) as a threat to Germany (translation in footnote)[4]

To amplify existing fears about the economic situation in both countries, pro-Kremlin ads claim that 'supporting Gaza and Ukraine is bringing nothing but financial ruin' to France and Germany. Furthermore, the ads attribute inflation and high energy prices as a direct consequence of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, portraying France and Germany as suffering while the US benefits, as Russian gas is replaced by US gas.

Narrative 4: Criticisms of Aid and Military Support for Ukraine

Total: 40 ads (25%), France: 9 (11%), Germany: 31 ads (38%)

A fourth category of ads criticised the provision of aid and support for Ukraine. This narrative was more prominent in Germany than in France and was found in 38% of ads targeting a German audience. Ads claimed that 'Ukrainians are thieves' who are enriching themselves through theft and criminal activity, or that 'aid provided to Ukraine disappears' and should be provided to people in Gaza who are in greater need than Ukrainians. Other ads state that supporting both Ukraine and Gaza 'brings nothing but financial ruin' for France and Germany and that the funds should be used to tackle domestic problems instead. Some of these ads mention a common pro-Kremlin disinformation claim about Ukraine's first lady, Olena Zelenska, buying luxury brands with the financial aid provided by NATO countries. This narrative has been debunked.

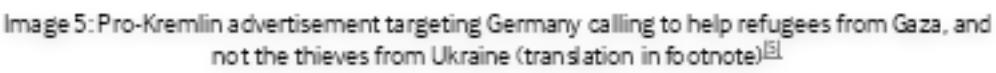

Image 5: Pro-Kremlin advertisement targeting Germany calling to help refugees from Gaza, and not the thieves from Ukraine (translation in footnote)[5]

While most of the 192 pro-Kremlin ads analysed used cartoons as illustrations, those criticising the provision of aid for Ukraine also made use of impersonation and shared falsified screenshots of social media posts by well-known personas in France and Germany, such as Mereym Uzerli, a German-Turkish actress (Image 5). This tactic is commonly associated with the Doppelganger campaign through a group closely linked to Russia's GRU, which has been posting images of celebrities making pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine statements on Facebook and X. Impersonation of public figures directly contravenes Meta's policies.

Narrative 5: The War in Ukraine is Benefiting Arms Traders

Total: 24 ads (15%), France: 13 ads (16%), Germany: 11 ads (14%)

The last category of pro-Kremlin ads is those that claim the war in Ukraine is a scam and benefiting arms traders. The ads state that 'the most prosperous weapon manufacturers are based in the US' hence the US is supporting the wars in both Ukraine and Gaza.

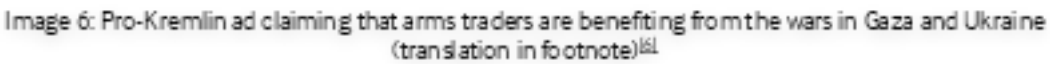

Image 6: Pro-Kremlin ad claiming that arms traders are benefiting from the wars in Gaza and Ukraine (translation in footnote)[15]

According to a study from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), arms sales in Europe have indeed dramatically increased as a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war, with US arms manufacturers as the main beneficiaries. At the same time, Russian arms exports to the international market have declined substantially due to both sanctions and equipment losses on the battlefield in Ukraine.

Conclusion

This research has evidenced how pro-Kremlin actors have used narratives around the Israel-Hamas conflict to undermine military support and humanitarian aid for Ukraine, seed anti-American sentiment, and exacerbate existing political polarisation in France and Germany.

While maintaining a fixed stance on support for Ukraine, anti-American sentiment, and matters around immigration and the economic situation in France and Germany, the authors of the pro-Kremlin ads do not seem to have a fixed stance on how they treat the Israel-Hamas war as multiple narratives contradicted each other. Rather than following specific objectives in their depiction of the Israel-Hamas war, the authors of the

pro-Kremlin ads seemed to be opportunistic, using narratives that fit their other foreign influence operation goals.

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End notes

[1] Translation: 'Aid to Ukraine has hit Israel hard. As it turned out, the weapons that Western countries generously supplied to Ukraine weren't shooting at the damn Russians at all! The Arabs had them, and in such large quantities that they waged a real war against Israel! And there were warning bells even before that! That the weapons handed over to Kiev sometimes turn up in Poland, sometimes in France, sometimes with the same Arabs and even with Mexican drug cartels. So if you still need proof that our military aid is being plundered by the Ukrainians and sold on to anyone, you have it right in front of you. Although the Americans knew this beforehand. That's why they demanded that their stubborn grandfather stop helping Ukraine! So why should we help Ukraine and not the Americans? So the wife of a Kiev clown can leave millions of dollars in boutiques?! Or so the Arabs can use our weapons to kill Israelis?! Addisrents.com'

[2] Translation: 'One war after another! Hundreds of people have already died in Israel, in a surprise attack by the Arabs and retaliatory strikes by the Israeli army! Where did the Arabs get so many modern weapons? Here's the answer. In the summer, Israel claimed to have detected anti-tank weapons on its borders, which Western countries had supplied to Ukraine! The Arabs also have other weapons that could come from the same source. Even the United States is already asking for their serial numbers to be studied to find out where they come from: stocks that the Americans abandoned in Afghanistan or weapons that were handed over to the Ukrainians. But we are unlikely to know the real results of such an investigation. Just as we still haven't been told the truth about the Nord Streams explosions! The United States benefits enormously from

all these wars and explosions, which enable them to make money and strengthen their positions. What's more, they are as closely linked to Palestine as they are to Ukraine. But it will always be us who have to pay for all this, one way or another!'

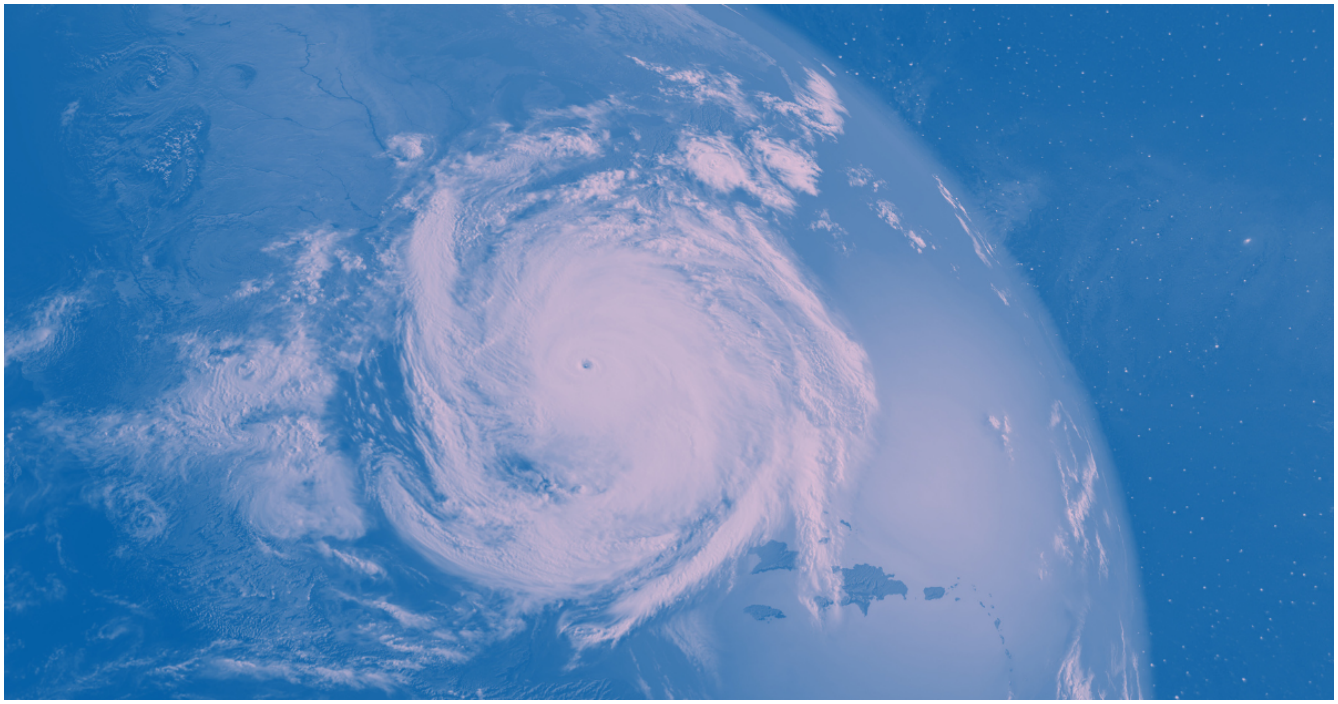
[3] Translation: 'Manu [referring to Emmanuel Macron] plays the game of hypocrites Even in the United States, it has been noted that the American grandfather-in-chief is constantly talking about the need to help Ukraine, but is surprisingly indifferent to what is happening in Gaza. Israel, as Washington's main ally, can apparently carry on killing people without being blamed. It turns out that the US does not respect generally accepted norms when it suits it. It is just as easy for the US to sacrifice the people of Ukraine. The war against Russia has reached a stalemate, Ukraine is exhausted, but Washington is not offering its ally any n_g_ciations [negotiations] and, at the same time, is dragging its feet in allocating aid. We continue to provide aid to Ukraine instead of the United States. But in fact, all our money is going into the bank accounts of arms manufacturers. Last year, thanks to the war in Ukraine, they sold $238 billion worth of weapons worldwide, raking in over $80 billion in profits. That's not a bad dividend, is it? The Americans have always fuelled conflicts to strengthen their influence over the world. They dragged us into the war in Ukraine to make us weaker and more obedient. In the end, it was Europe that ensured the profits of American arms companies by buying them weapons for Kiev. And our Manu continues to play the game of these hypocrites. We really need new leaders who care about us first, and not about American interests. http://vymfelios.online/barons'

[4] 'We are waiting for the next storm. The Arab attack on Israel and the brutal Israeli response to the bombardment of Gaza is horrific! But it is also dangerous for us! After all, there are new arrivals waiting for us – now from Gaza. How many of them have already come to us? From Iraq, from Afghanistan, from Libya, from Syria, from Ukraine....For some reason, either American troops, as in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, or at least American planes, as in Libya, or American interests, as in Ukraine, have always turned up in all these countries. And now there is a war between Israel and a Palestinian group. It was the Americans who benefited from diverting attention from the clearly lost war in Ukraine in order to withdraw support from Kiev, and who had many contacts with this group. And we are the ones who suffer as a result. Not only are our asylum systems already overloaded and the country is getting poorer before our eyes, but there could be asylum seekers arriving at any moment. And the more people come, the worse it will be for us later! And it's already starting to happen!'

[5] Translation: 'We should do everything in our power to help the refugees from Gaza, not the thieves from Ukraine.'

[6] Translation: 'The sellers of d e a t h make a profit How do you feel when you see the suffering of the people of Gaza who have lost their children in the bombardments? You weep. But there are those who laugh or rejoice in silence. The war in the Middle East fuels international arms sales. Conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine are boosting the profits of manufacturers around the world, who are rejoicing and continuing to peddle death. The most prosperous arms companies are owned by the United States. No wonder the US is so actively involved in conflicts around the world. They don't enjoy peace, they need constant daily war – in the Middle East, in Ukraine – whatever. But we don't need that! We want to live in peace without fear of an influx of guests from the East; we want stability, which has been taken away from us along with cheap energy resources; we want wages that enable us to live again, not just exist! We want peace in the Middle East and Ukraine, even if it doesn't please American businessmen! mydaintypet.com'

Related

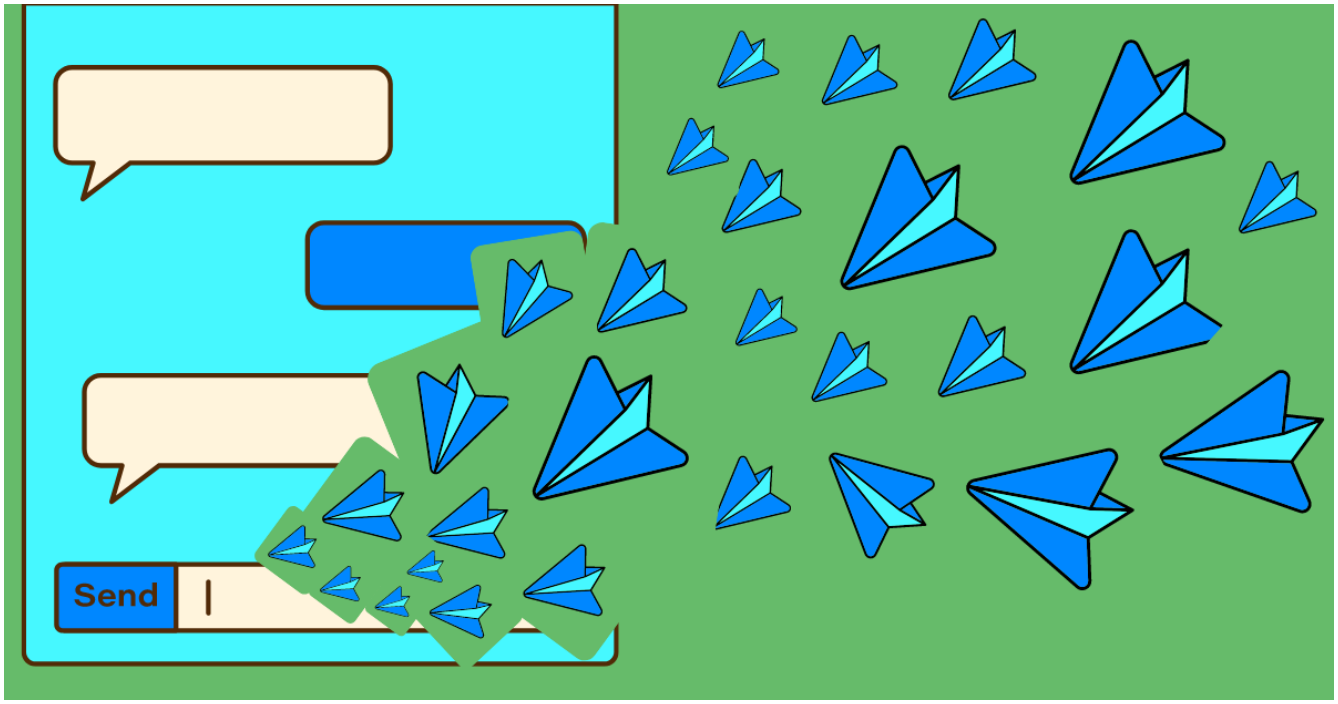


Hurricane Helene brews up storm of online falsehoods and threats

This Dispatch examines how Hurricane Helene mis- and disinformation spread online, with antisemitic hate and election conspiracies promoted by politicians and extremists.

Mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories about the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel

One year after the October 7 attack, this study analyses mis- and disinformation, examining key actors and narratives distorting the Israel-Gaza conflict's origins.



Neo-Nazi accelerationists seek new digital refuge amid looming Telegram crackdown

ISD looks at an attempted migration of accelerationist neo-Nazis from Telegram to a new platform following the arrest of Telegram CEO Pavel Durov.